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SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA, NEA/IPA, NEA/PPD

WHITE HOUSE FOR PRESS OFFICE, SIT ROOM
NSC FOR NEA STAFF

SECDEF WASHDC FOR USDP/ASD-PA/ASD-ISA
HQ USAF FOR XXXX
DA WASHDC FOR SASA
JOINT STAFF WASHDC FOR PA
USCINCENT MACDILL AFB FL FOR POLAD/USIA ADVISOR
COMSOCEUR VAIHINGEN GE FOR PAO/POLAD
COMSIXTHFLT FOR 019

JERUSALEM ALSO FOR ICD
LONDON ALSO FOR HKANONA AND POL
PARIS ALSO FOR POL
ROME FOR MFO

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [IS](#) [KMDR](#) [MEDIA](#) [REACTION](#) [REPORT](#)
SUBJECT: ISRAEL MEDIA REACTION

SUBJECTS COVERED IN THIS REPORT:

Mideast

Key stories in the media:

All major newspapers, except The Jerusalem Post, led with the likelihood of early elections, possibly as soon as February. The media highlighted PM Sharon's statement on Wednesday that he wants new elections to be held as soon as possible, since he does not want "to waste time on a lengthy election campaign." Leading media reported that Sharon met with Labor Party Chairman MK Amir Peretz this morning. Israel Radio quoted Peretz as saying after the meeting that he agreed with Sharon that the elections should be held between late February and late March, and that Sharon will set the final date. The radio reported that Sharon will also meet Shinui party leader Yosef (Tommy) Lapid, the head of the opposition in the Knesset. The media reported that during the weekend, Sharon is expected to decide whether he will found a new party or remain in the Likud. Ha'aretz and The Jerusalem Post reported that the Yesha Council of Jewish Settlements in the Territories has begun collecting signatures from settlement mayors urging all right-wing parties to form a joint list in the next elections.

All media reported on, and The Jerusalem Post bannered, meetings of senior Israeli officials with Arab leaders in Tunis. Israel Radio reported that FM Silvan Shalom declared at the World Summit on the Information Society that if the PA adopts a strategic decision to fight terror, Israel will resume the dialogue with the PA and return to the Roadmap. Shalom cited Hamas's use of the Internet to harm Israel. The radio quoted PA Chairman [President] Mahmoud Abbas as saying in his speech to the conference that Israel continues to use collective punishment against the Palestinians. The radio further reported that Abbas urged Israel to return to the negotiating table soon and to achieve President Bush's vision -- a Palestinian state with territorial contiguity that would be at peace with Israel. The media reported that Shalom and Abbas also held two bilateral meetings on Wednesday, constituting the highest-level Israeli-Palestinian contacts in the past several months. The Jerusalem Post front-paged a picture of Communications Minister Dalia Itzik shaking hands with her Iraqi counterpart, Dr. Jowan Fuad Masum. The newspaper reported that the two exchanged invitations to visit each other's countries. Yediot reported that Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali told Shalom that he welcomes Israeli tourists to visit his country.

Ha'aretz and other media reported that Israel, the Palestinian Authority, and the EU decided on Wednesday that the 50 to 70 European monitors set to inspect the Rafah border crossing will have the authority to ensure that the PA complies with all agreements relating to the terminal, but not to enforce Israeli or Palestinian law. Israel Radio reported that the PA has requested that the EU begin posting monitors at the Rafah border crossing on Monday. The radio also reported on

Palestinian allegations that Deputy U.S. National Security Advisor Elliott Abrams attempted to surreptitiously introduce amendments in Israel's favor during the negotiations on the Agreement on Movement and Access. The radio reported that most amendments proposed by the Palestinians were eventually adopted. Israel Radio also reported on Palestinian claims, which were also recognized by Israeli and U.S. sources, that Amos Gilad, head of the Defense Ministry's political bureau, and military secretary Nathan Dangott (phon.), dragged their feet during the negotiations, thereby endangering their success. Maariv quoted Quartet Special Envoy James Wolfensohn as saying that during diplomatic meetings, senior Israelis tend to focus on security matters and to neglect other important issues. Marc Otte, the EU's Special Envoy to the Middle East, was quoted as saying in an interview with Ha'aretz that the crossings agreement may be technical, but that its success can shed light on the entire region.

Ha'aretz cited an AP story that President Moshe Katsav, who is on an official visit to Italy, told reporters on Wednesday that he has reservations about the Gaza crossings agreement, which he believes may worsen Israel's security situation.

Leading media reported that on Wednesday, Sharon launched a 17-billion shekel (around USD 3.6 billion) plan for developing the Negev. The Jerusalem Post and Ha'aretz reported that Foreign Ministry officials confirmed Wednesday that contacts with the U.S. had resumed over negotiating terms for an estimated USD 1.2 billion Israeli aid request for Negev and Galilee development.

Leading media quoted Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz as saying Wednesday at a meeting with heads of local settlement councils from the West Bank: "I intend to continue to promote construction of the fence, to give maximum security to the citizens and also to strengthen the settlement blocs, because I believe that the settlement blocs have to be strong.... Together with the Jordan Valley, they will constitute the eastern border of the State of Israel, also in the future." Mofaz was quoted as saying that a decision will be made before the elections on the building plans for the E-1 neighborhood, which is intended to create a link between Ma'aleh Adumim and Jerusalem.

The Jerusalem Post reported that commanders of air forces from NATO nations and senior officers from North African countries -- including some without diplomatic relations with Israel -- have wrapped up a visit to Israel, where they learned how to fight terrorism from the air. Beside NATO, participants included officers from Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia, and Morocco.

Leading media reported that soldiers manning the Hawara checkpoint outside of Nablus prevented a suicide bombing when they nabbed a Palestinian carrying an explosives belt on Wednesday afternoon.

Ha'aretz reported that the deaths of two senior Palestinian security officials -- Bashir Nafeh and Abed Allun -- who were rivals of PA National Security Adviser Jibril Rajoub in the bombing of Amman's Grand Hyatt Hotel may bring about more quiet in the territories.

Ha'aretz, Yediot, and Maariv quoted Ahmad Talebzadeh, the head of Iran's space agency, as saying on Wednesday that Sina-1, Iran's first satellite, which was launched from Russia about a month ago, can spy on Israel. The newspapers said that Iranian officials had claimed that the satellite was purely scientific.

The Jerusalem Post reported that, ignoring Israeli opposition, the Greek Orthodox Church will proceed with plans for the coronation of the new Patriarch of Jerusalem, Theophilos III. He will replace the ousted Irineos I.

Maariv reported that a first draft of a proposed constitution for Israel will be presented to the Knesset in three months.

Ha'aretz compared Egypt, which views the Muslim Brotherhood as a threat, with Jordan, where the movement has placed itself squarely with King Abdullah II in his war on Islamic terror.

Leading media quoted senior PA official Ahmad Abdul Rahman as saying, in an interview that appeared Wednesday in the London-based newspaper Al-Quds Al-Arabi, that the late PA Chairman Yasser Arafat died after a poison was injected into his ear at the end of

September 2003.

Ha'aretz and Maariv reported that Israel will sign the International Treaty Against Corruption despite a dispute over the matter between the Foreign and Defense ministries.

Reporting on President Bush's hardships in Congress, Ha'aretz Washington correspondent Shmuel Rosner wrote, "The war in the U.S. is already almost as tough as in Iraq."

Yediot reported that an Israeli woman was hospitalized in Thailand. She is allegedly suspected of being ill with avian influenza.

Maariv reported that Israel has warned Ukraine that it would damage bilateral relations if Ukraine does not take legal steps to close the "anti-Semitic" university MAUP, which supported Iran's call to wipe Israel off the map.

Maariv printed the results of a recent TNS/Teleseker Polling Institute survey conducted this week:
-Were the Likud to be led by Sharon, it would beat the Labor Party in the next elections by 38 to 27 Knesset seats. (In the current Knesset, Likud has 40 seats and Labor 22.)
-Were the Likud to be led by Binyamin Netanyahu, Likud and Labor would obtain 33 seats each.

Maariv cited the results of a poll conducted among the residents of the settlement of Beit Arye, east of Ben-Gurion Airport: 85 percent favor leaving their community or having it relocate. The Jerusalem Post also reported on the poll.

Mideast:

Summary:

Independent, left-leaning Ha'aretz editorialized: "The border crossing agreement ... reflects growing involvement by outside parties in the conduct of day-to-day negotiations between Israel and the PA, as well as a growing American role in this involvement, in which Europe and Egypt also have a share."

Veteran op-ed writer and assistant to the late prime minister Yitzhak Rabin Eytan Haber opined in the lead editorial of mass-circulation, pluralist Yediot Aharonot: "The Palestinians will look for any way, any opportunity, and any 'hole in the net,' in order to breach agreements and score gains on the ground."

The conservative, independent Jerusalem Post editorialized: "If the Palestinian leadership truly decides to confront and expunge the terrorists, this agreement will prove largely redundant and will be easily implemented. Absent such a decision, this agreement will be added to the heap of previously signed dead letters."

Very liberal columnist Meron Benvenisti wrote in Ha'aretz: "If massive pressure and personal intervention by Rice were necessary to achieve a meager technical agreement, what are the chances of real progress in the peace process?"

Middle East affairs commentator Guy Bechor, a lecturer at the Interdisciplinary Center, wrote in mass-circulation, pluralist Yediot Aharonot: "Working relations are the most that Israel can get from the Arab world today, certainly after five years of Intifada that have poisoned the region."

Block Quotes:

I. "The Third Party and the Next Step"

Independent, left-leaning Ha'aretz editorialized (November 17): "Had it not been for the pressure exerted by Rice, with the clear backing of President George Bush, the Agreement [on Movement and Access] would not have been reached. The Israelis and Palestinians failed in their efforts to compromise, as did Israel's two cabinet ministers, Shimon Peres and Shaul Mofaz. Only the understanding that it would be better not to ignore Rice's insistent demands caused Sharon to impose his will on the security establishment. The border crossing agreement thus reflects growing involvement by outside parties in the

conduct of day-to-day negotiations between Israel and the PA, as well as a growing American role in this involvement, in which Europe and Egypt also have a share. General Keith Dayton, who was appointed yesterday as America's security coordinator in the region following William Ward's transfer to another military posting, will be umpiring not the internal Palestinian game -- the merger of its security services -- but the competition between Israel and the PA. The organization under his command will determine whether Israel's demands to deny entry to specific individuals who 'arouse concern,' in the agreement's words, are justified. He will also decide whether the Palestinians' behavior at the border terminals accords with the agreement.... The third party ... must move on without delay to the next step: pressuring the Palestinians to disarm the terrorist organizations and Israel to dismantle the West Bank outposts."

II. "The Palestinians Will Look For a Hole in the Net"

Veteran op-ed writer and assistant to the late prime minister Yitzhak Rabin Eytan Haber opined in the lead editorial of mass-circulation, pluralist Yediot Aharonot (November 17): "Let there be no understandings: the crossings agreement for Palestinians and their vehicles from Gaza to Jerusalem and vice-versa, the construction of a port, and the passage of goods to Israel will cause a great security headache and perhaps big trouble to Israel. The Palestinians will look for any way, any opportunity, and any 'hole in the net,' in order to breach agreements and score gains on the ground."

III. "The Rafah Deal"

The conservative, independent Jerusalem Post editorialized (November 17): "So now the deal to open up the Rafah crossing is done. That was the easy part, even though it took months of wrangling. The hard part will be for the Palestinian leadership to summon the determination to confront terrorism, without which no such agreement can work.... Only Israeli military actions against terrorism, and not signed documents, have ever consistently provided a disincentive for the PA's cooperation with, and tolerance of, terrorist groups. Among the lessons from the failure of the Oslo Accords is that, no matter how detailed an agreement is, it is worthless if it not backed by international support for holding the parties accountable. In simple terms: a deal without consequences is an inconsequential deal. If the Palestinian leadership truly decides to confront and expunge the terrorists, this agreement will prove largely redundant and will be easily implemented. Absent such a decision, this agreement will be added to the heap of previously signed dead letters."

IV. "The Rafah Precedent"

Very liberal columnist Meron Benvenisti wrote in Ha'aretz (November 17): "Now that Condoleezza Rice decided to show [Israeli Defense Minister Shaul] Mofaz who the real boss is, he has capitulated, but he is trying to explain his capitulation as a concession to America's need for an achievement. The Palestinians do not interest him. After all, if he wanted a confidence-building relationship with them, he would have agreed long ago to the arrangements laid out in the Rafah Agreement, without massive American pressure. The Palestinians also do not interest the Americans, and were it not for Rice's desperate need for some kind of achievement for public relations purposes, this agreement would never have been reached. The last thing that the President of the U.S. wants is to nurture the illusion that in the wake of the Rafah precedent, other American initiatives to advance the process will be forthcoming. And the Israeli public is already being reassured that the Rafah agreement is 'the last move' before the start of a lengthy campaign season.... Indeed, one can be pleased that American pressure led to an agreement that is significant on the level of principle. But one could also ask the following question: if massive pressure and personal intervention by Rice were necessary to achieve a meager technical agreement, what are the chances of real progress in the peace process?"

V. "Less Is More"

Middle East affairs commentator Guy Bechor, a lecturer at the Interdisciplinary Center, wrote in mass-circulation, pluralist Yediot Aharonot (November 17): "Disengagement from the Gaza Strip undoubtedly brought with it the first contacts and signals in years from Arab and Islamic countries towards Israel. As of now,

this is at a level of quiet meetings and cooperative ventures. These contacts can be characterized as practical activity, though without the official-diplomatic seal of approval.... Working relations are the most that Israel can get from the Arab world today, certainly after five years of Intifada that have poisoned the region. Unfortunately, Israel's reputation in Arab and Muslim public opinion is worse today than ever before.... Perhaps it is time to learn from the failed 1990s and to understand that in our region it is necessary to conduct oneself modestly, without any declarations, Nobel Prizes, vision or festive promises. The greater the public Israeli aspiration, the greater the resistance in the Arab public will be, accordingly.... The rule with regard to the highly fragile relations that are currently being renewed with the Arab and Islamic world should therefore be: without arrogance, brass bands, fanfares or festive summits; without ceremonies and formalism, undue statements or provocations; but with quiet and productive economic, commercial and diplomatic work on the ground. We should not perceive this practical work as a prelude to the main thing. It is the main thing in and of itself."

JONES